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ABSTRACT

The National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL) is addressing problems of evaluation of family literacy programs through portfolio assessment. Beginning in fall 1991, 15 programs began using portfolios to document parent-child interactions. This guide provides a description of the introduction of portfolio assessment into these programs and presents a method for overcoming problems and analyzing contents of the portfolios. The project will continue to evolve as teachers and parents collaboratively decide how portfolios will be used. NCFL portfolios document changes in knowledge and beliefs about parent-child relationships and changes in parenting practices. Different formats are used, ranging from file folders to videotapes and computer disks. Additions to the portfolio are made once a month in teacher-family conferences. Evaluation of the Portfolios is ongoing at these meetings. Specific questions that teachers might have are addressed, and problems that centers have encountered so far are described. As the use of portfolios unfolds, the NCFL will update this guide. One figure and a 28-item list of references are included. (SLD)

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Family Portfolios:

Documenting Change in Parent-Child Relationships

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Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Section 1 What Are Portfolios? 2
- Operational definition of portfolios 2
- Authentic versus conventional assessment 2

Section 2 Introducing the Family Portfolio 4
- Decisions to make before implementing portfolios 4
  - Purpose 4
  - Format 5
  - Content 5
  - Ownership 10
  - Accessibility 10
- Questions often asked after implementation 12
- Common implementation problems 19

Section 3 Analyzing the Contents of Family Portfolios 20
- Analyzing individual portfolios 20
- Aggregating portfolio data 22

Section 4 Conclusion 23

Section 5 References 24

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Introduction

A common problem in the evaluation of family literacy programs is documentation of changes in parent-child relationships. How do you capture and describe the qualitative changes that occur in families over the course of participation in family literacy programs? What are the underlying values and beliefs about children and literacy that accompany change in parents? How do you evaluate that kind of information when you are able to get it?

The National Center for Family Literacy is addressing this set of evaluation problems through the use of portfolio assessment. Beginning in the fall of 1991, fifteen family literacy programs began using portfolios to document parent-child interactions. This guide provides a description of how portfolio assessment was introduced in those programs, problems that were encountered, suggestions for overcoming those problems, and a method for analyzing the contents of portfolios. It is a description of how portfolios are being used for a particular purpose in a particular type of setting: family literacy programs.

The project will continue to evolve. Teachers and parents are collaboratively deciding how the portfolios will be used in family literacy sites. We will continue to learn how the various approaches are working throughout the 1991-92 school year. We invite comments from readers who are interested in this approach to assessment. Your comments will inform periodic revisions of this guide.

1. What Are Portfolios?

What are portfolios? The simplest answer to that question is that they are the place where samples of one's work are stored. That place may be a file folder, notebook, photo album, or computer disk, for example.

There should be criteria for selecting what does and does not get included in one's portfolio. Those criteria are often developed collaboratively by teachers and students.

Portfolio entries are made at regular intervals throughout the school year. Students and teachers share the responsibility for making selections of work to be included and for assessing the work.

Those are some operational descriptions of what portfolios are. In addition, portfolios represent a new way of thinking about assessment. They are a method that is part of the movement called authentic assessment. Proponents of authentic assessment advocate the use of methods that invite students to share in the responsibility for assessing their own performance and advocate the use of assessments that resemble actual practice.

This approach stands in contrast to traditional approaches to assessment. In traditional approaches, teachers give tests at specified intervals, often testing only at the beginning and end of instruction. In authentic assessment, assessment data are gathered and evaluated continuously over the course of the school year.

In traditional approaches, responsibility for assessment lies with teachers. They administer tests and score them. Students have no input into the criteria by which they are judged or the development of the assessment instruments. Students take the tests and accept the scores. In authentic assessment approaches like portfolios, students become active participants in their own evaluation. They collaborate with teachers in the development of criteria for selecting what goes into portfolios and the criteria by which those contents will be judged.

Figure 1.1 compares traditional and authentic approaches to assessment. Based on Chittenden (1991), the comparison shows that the two approaches differ in terms of underlying assumptions as well as in method.

Figure 1.1
A Comparison of Two Approaches to Assessment

Authentic Assessment	Conventional Assessment
On-going and cumulative	Annual pre/post testing
Open-ended format	Closed format; multiple choice tests, for example
Work samples drawn from a variety of classroom settings	Based on information from single, decontextualized settings
Theory-referenced	Norm-referenced
Teacher-mediated	Teacher-proof

Figure 1.1 shows that authentic assessment approaches, such as portfolios, require teachers to rethink the way they do assessment. Portfolios are not simply a different method; they also require redefinition of student and teacher roles in assessment.

2. Introducing the Family Portfolio

Portfolios can take different forms and serve a variety of purposes. Before implementing portfolio assessment in your family literacy program, decisions should be made regarding the portfolio's:

- purpose
- format
- content
- ownership
- accessibility

How NCFL addressed these issues will be described below. A question and answer format will be used to describe how family portfolios were introduced and maintained. One set of questions will address decisions that should be made prior to implementing portfolios. A second set will present questions that teachers commonly ask once they have begun using portfolios.

Decisions To Make Before You Start

What is the purpose of the portfolio?

The portfolio's purpose must be defined in order to develop criteria for selecting entries and for evaluating the contents. A decision was made in this project to focus on parent-child relationships.

The purpose of the NCFL family portfolio is to document parent-child relationships, and parent and child reflections on those relationships, over time. The portfolios were designed to document changes in knowledge and beliefs about parent-child relationships, as well as changes in parenting practices.

Another purpose, implied through the choice of portfolios as a method of assessment, is to have parents and children share in the responsibility for their own program participation.

What physical form does the portfolio take?

Different sites have developed different formats for storing portfolio entries. Many chose to use file folders. One is using photo albums with photographs as the organizing concept for the entries. One has developed computer-based portfolios. Others have experimented with videotape and audiotape.

The format should be one that teachers, parents, and children agree on and one that can be maintained consistently over the course of the year. Formats include:

- File folders
- 3 ring notebooks
- Photo albums
- Videotapes
- Audiotapes
- Computer disks

Sites may elect to incorporate one or more of the formats in the design of family portfolios. For example, a file folder can contain audiotapes and computer disks, as well as paper copies of family literacy activities.

What contents should be included in portfolios?

The contents should be chosen to address the purpose of the portfolio. In the NCFL family portfolios, the purpose is to document parent-child relationships over time. The entries selected for inclusion in portfolios reflect that purpose.

Parents and children may want to include in portfolios actual products or works-in-progress from joint parent-child literacy activities. Works such as drawings, small paintings, and stories can be stored conveniently in a portfolio.

But some types of joint activities yield works that don't fit easily into a portfolio. Examples include: puppets made by the parent and child; a structure made of lego blocks; and a pumpkin carved at Halloween.

Other parent-child activities have undefined products. Examples include: dressing up in costumes; cooking a pretend meal; singing a song; reading a book together; and exploratory play in a sand box or at a water table.

For works that can't be physically included in portfolios, representations can be entered instead. An example below will illustrate how different formats can be used to portray representations of joint parent-child activities. Those formats include:

- xerox copies
- photographs
- videotape
- audiotape
- computer disk

As an example, suppose a parent and child work over the course of a month making puppets, writing a play, and then performing the play for the other families in the literacy program. How can this be represented in their family portfolio? Some options include:

> Take photographs of the parent and child at different stages of making the puppets. Have the parent and child write descriptions for each of the photographs, explaining the process.
>
> Make a videotape of scenes showing the parent and child making the puppets and/or performing the play.
>
> Parent and child make an audiotape with instructions for making puppets; develop written instructions and lists of materials to go with the tape.
>
> Xerox copies of tools required to make puppets: scissors, paste, tape, cloth, yarn, etc. Parent and child label the objects on the xerox copy and describe how the puppets were made.
>
> Parent and child can write the script for the play on a word processor and use a graphics program to illustrate the scenes. A hard copy of the script can be stored in the portfolio, or a disk-based version can be stored there.

At one of the sites implementing NCFL family portfolios this year, parents and children are maintaining portfolios on computer disks. They type descriptions and interpretations of parent-child activities into word

processing documents. They use graphics programs to develop representations of the activities.

One site has also experimented with the use of videotape. An option here is to have the videotape serve as the family's portfolio. Each month, parents and children can stage a presentation that will be added to their videotape portfolio. That presentation can have parents showing works from joint literacy activities; demonstrating a typical activity, such as reading a book or playing in the block area; and then describing and interpreting the activity/artifact for the viewer.

How often should you add new materials to the portfolios?

In this project, we asked teachers to meet with parents and children and make additions to the portfolios once a month. Initially, it is expected that teachers will take a leadership role in facilitating the conferences. As time goes on, and as parents and children become more familiar with the process, they will take on more of the responsibility for the process of making selection decisions.

As parents and children become more actively involved in the process, they may decide to have portfolio meetings more frequently than on a monthly basis. Some sites hold conferences as frequently as every 2-3 weeks. The timing between conferences should be a mutual decision between teachers and families.

Can you be more specific? What do I say to a parent and child when we have a conference to select entries for their portfolio?

When you sit down for the conference, ask the parent and child to think back over the weeks since the last portfolio conference, or since the beginning of school if this is the first conference. Ask the child to recall activities done with the parent. Ask the parent to reflect on such questions as:

- What were your expectations for the joint parent-child activities?
- What did you hope to accomplish? What did you actually accomplish?

- What difficulties, if any, were anticipated? were encountered?
- What have you learned about yourself and your child during this period?

Then ask the parent to make a summary statement addressing those questions. The statement can be made orally, as part of the conference's dialogue. Audiotape can be used to record oral summary statements. Summaries can also be made in written form as entries in portfolios. The teacher should make a judgement as to whether asking the parent to write the statement would be appropriate. Initially, it may be better to do this orally. As parents become more familiar with the portfolio process, and when they are comfortable with putting their thoughts in written form, it will become appropriate to put this statement in writing.

The summary statement will provide a context for selecting portfolio entries that are typical for the period. Ask the parent and child to pick something that is typical of what they do during joint activities. It might be a drawing they did together, a story the child dictated to the mother, an audiotape of the mother reading a story to the child, etc. Entries are often works-in-progress. The important point here is that the entry reflects the typical types and levels of activities for the parent and child during that period. It may be necessary to choose more than one entry in order to show the range of activity during that period.

Once an entry has been chosen, have the parent and child give it a name and tell what it is. Early in the process, parent and child descriptions tend to be brief. For example:

> This is a picture I helped [my daughter] do during PACT time.

Later, as they have more practice in reflecting on their activities and discussing them with peers and teachers, parents and children will add more detail to their descriptions. For example, the same mother and daughter later in the year might describe a similar drawing:

> We chose this drawing because it is one of the kinds of things [my daughter] and I have been doing this month in PACT. She used red, yellow, and blue crayons--those are the colors she is learning this month. The picture shows a mother and daughter cooking dinner. At the bottom, I wrote the story that [my daughter] told me about the picture.

This second description mentions several details about the portfolio entry: it was done with crayons; it was an activity done jointly by mother and

daughter; the daughter is learning the colors red, yellow, and blue; the drawing is a representation of a mother-child home activity; the mother followed the child's lead and wrote down the story dictated by the child.

Over time, regular use of the family portfolio will stimulate parents and children to reflect on their activities on a daily basis, not just during monthly conferences.

After describing what the entry is, have the parent and child write an interpretation of the entry. More simply, write a description of what it means to them. For example:

> [My daughter] likes this drawing because "it is pretty" and because she "did it with her mama." I like it because I never expected that a three-year-old would be able to draw a picture and then tell a story about it. But she did. She used words I didn't know she knew how to say. And she knew what all the words meant.
>
> She has been asking me to draw picture stories with her at home. We usually sit down after dinner and do one. Her older brother draws with us sometimes. Her father tells her she is really smart.

In summary, the process of selecting the entries to include in portfolios involves a conference, initially led by the teacher, where parents and children reflect, choose an entry, name it, and interpret it. In the NCFL family literacy sites, this discussion is linked to one of the program components, Parents and Children Together (PACT) time. During that component, parents and children participate in joint literacy activities. The teacher would lead the discussion in such a conference by asking the parent and child to:

1. Think about the things you did during PACT time this month. Tell me about something you were especially proud of. Tell me about something which didn't go as planned. Etc.

2. Let's pick one of those things to talk about some more. (Teacher facilitates, parent and child choose one of the activities/works/products that are typical for the past 4 weeks.)

3. Tell me what this is. (Teacher facilitates, parent and child give the chosen work a name and describe in writing what it is.)

4. Tell me more about it. Let's write a description that tells what it means to you. (Teacher facilitates, parent and child write an interpretation of the work.)

Who decides what goes in and what doesn't?

The parent and child, in collaboration with the teacher(s), make those decisions. The process of deciding is a critical part of the portfolio process. First, the involvement of the family in selecting portfolio contents sends a message that the family shares in the responsibility for evaluating their own program participation.

Second, the process of deciding what goes into the portfolios, and what doesn't, provides a time when families can reflect on their joint literacy activities. Over time, the habit of reflecting on parent-child activities, and on other program activities as well, will carry over into daily practice. It will no longer be something done once a month.

Who owns the portfolio?

The parent and the child own the portfolio. Since the portfolio will be used for program evaluation, though, issues of access must be negotiated before the portfolios are implemented.

Who has access to the portfolio?

In NCFL sites, the parent, the child, and the teacher have regular access to the family portfolio. In addition, parents have agreed that researchers from NCFL can review the contents of selected portfolios.

Issues of access should be negotiated with the parent and child when they enter the literacy program. Some programs may want to use portfolios as evidence of program effectiveness, as part of child's school record, and/or as a means of addressing teacher accountability. Those purposes should be identified at the very beginning. Access to portfolios is then negotiated upon that basis.

Who will evaluate the portfolio contents?

Parents and children are evaluating the contents of portfolios on a monthly basis. As described earlier, the monthly conference involves an evaluation of PACT activities for the previous four weeks. Decisions are made about

what is included in the portfolios. Interpretations of the entries are recorded and attached to the entries.

Teachers are also evaluating portfolio contents during monthly meetings. They gain information about such things as the parent's:

- level of engagement with the child;
- expectations of child performance;
- knowledge of child development; and
- values and beliefs about literacy.

Monthly conferences also provide teachers opportunities to gain insight into the child's:

- language development;
- level of play;
- engagement with the parent;
- views of literacy; and
- a variety of readiness skills.

This information helps teachers evaluate parent-child relationships. It allows teachers to answer such questions as:

- Does a particular child need more support, or more independence, from the parent?

- Does a particular parent have unrealistically high or low expectations of their child?

What happens to the portfolio at the end of the year?

This is related to the issue of ownership and should be negotiated before implementing portfolios.

In the NCFL sites, parents and children own the portfolios. The portfolios are kept at school, but some families are taking them home on weekends to share with family members. At the end of the school year, families will take the portfolios home to keep.

In other programs, there may be a desire to maintain some or all of the family portfolio as part of a child's school record. The portfolio can

provide important information about children's readiness for schooling, but this issue must be resolved prior to implementing the portfolios.

Questions Teachers Ask After Implementing Portfolios

What is the teacher's role in portfolio assessment?

The use of portfolio assessment requires teachers to shift out of the traditional role of test giver and scorer. Assessment becomes a collaborative process between teachers and families. Teachers share responsibility for assessment with parents and children.

The teacher's role is to facilitate this process. In the NCFL sites, teachers typically take the lead in portfolio conferences at the beginning of the year. They encourage parents to reflect on joint literacy activities with children and to choose typical ones for inclusion in the portfolios.

Teacher guidance is needed in the beginning for two reasons. One is that parents tend to include all joint literacy products in their portfolios, rather than going through the process of selecting typical pieces for inclusion. Teachers can use conferences as a time to teach the process of reflecting on past experiences and for choosing samples of typical activities for the period.

A second reason that teachers typically take the lead initially in portfolio conferences is to ensure that families focus on parent-child relationships. This is something that is not commonly done by many families upon entry into family literacy programs. Many families enter literacy programs based on the felt needs of the parents (Popp, 1991). Parents typically focus on their own need to pass a GED, get prevocational training, etc. In portfolio conferences, teachers can lead parents to focus on their joint activities with children as well, and to reflect on that component of the program.

What are the roles of parents and children?

Through the teacher's lead, parents and children should develop a sense of ownership for the portfolios. The intent with NCFL's family portfolios is that parents and children share in the responsibility for evaluating their own program participation. The role of parents and children is that of active participant in program planning and evaluation.

As already mentioned, this requires a rethinking of traditional student-teacher roles. Many of the parents in family literacy programs have a history of alienation from schooling. They were passive participants in educational programs as children, and as adults. Because many did not have prior experiences as active participants in schooling, parent may not be ready to step into that new role at first. It is the teacher's responsibility to facilitate the process, and to recognize when parents are comfortable with taking on more responsibility for the process of maintaining their own portfolios.

What about accountability in my role as teacher?

Some teachers fear that portfolios lack the kinds of "hard" evidence needed to document satisfactory job performance. They feel that a lack of evidence leaves them vulnerable to unsatisfactory job evaluations.

The opposite is the case, however. Portfolios contain detailed records of family change over time. They contain monthly updates of family performance and evaluations of that performance. Portfolios, in fact, contain much more compelling evidence of teacher effectiveness than would pre- and post-test scores on a standardized measure of parent-child relationships. Portfolios document how families get from point A to point B; pre/post-testing simply identifies the amount of change from point A to point B.

How will portfolios help me understand the families in my program better? What will the portfolios be able to tell me?

Portfolios will give you at least two kinds of information. First, you will have an ongoing record of the types and levels of activities in which parents and children are engaged. For example, one goal of Parent and Child Together (PACT) sessions in NCFL literacy sites is for children to

plan and lead joint activities with parents. At the same time, parents are learning ways to support child-initiated play.

A family's portfolio might show that parent and child engaged in parallel play during initial PACT sessions, moved to parent-initiated joint activities by the following month, and eventually to child-initiated joint activities later in the year.

In addition to providing a record of the actual parent-child activities, family portfolios also document families' interpretations of those activities. Changes in parental knowledge of child development, parent expectations and aspirations, families' views and beliefs about literacy, and families' uses of literacy will be apparent in the written interpretations of portfolio entries.

***Do portfolios replace tests? Where do they fit, in terms of my total program assessment and* evaluation?**

The position taken here is that portfolios do not replace tests. Portfolios and tests represent different stances toward evaluation with different underlying assumptions, but both can provide useful information for evaluation of family literacy programs. NCFL takes a pragmatic approach to assessment, using a variety of assessments across multiple settings.

The nature of change in parent-child relationships is complex. Single pre/post measures of home literacy environment or parental knowledge of child development do not adequately describe the change that occurs between parents and children in family literacy programs. Portfolios are being used for this purpose in NCFL sites because they can capture and describe complex changes over time.

Is it OK to put things like tests scores in portfolios?

Yes. The results of parent surveys, home literacy environment questionnaires, etc. can provide pieces of information to document current states of parent-child relationships. When such instruments are included, parents and children should treat them as any other portfolio entry: describe what it is and why it was chosen for inclusion. This naming and interpretation of the instrument should be put in writing and attached to the instrument.

How do I find time in an already busy school day to manage the portfolios? I have twelve families enrolled in my program. It would take me several days each month to do conferences with each parent and child.

First, you don't have to do all of the portfolio conferences at the end of each month. You may want to stagger the scheduling of conferences so that you do three a week. That way, you can accommodate twelve family conferences every four-week period.

Second, the portfolio conferences should support what you are already doing with the families in your program. They shouldn't be thought of as taking time away from other program components.

For example, one of the primary activities of the adult education component of many family literacy programs is the development of the parents' abilities to express thoughts in written form. Whole language approaches are used to combine the teaching of reading and writing. Portfolio conferences are natural complements to those processes. In fact, as parents develop more investment in the portfolio process, it may serve as a catalyst for the development of writing skills.

How do I get parents and children to take portfolios seriously and to commit the time and effort necessary for maintaining portfolios over the course of the year?

First, communicate to them that you as a teacher consider the portfolio to be an important activity. You can do that by setting aside the time necessary to do the monthly conferences, and by showing patient interest in the development of each family portfolio. It will be slow in the beginning but, as parents and children become accustomed to the process, they will take on more of the responsibility for maintaining their own portfolios.

Second, link the portfolio to existing program components and activities. Don't present it as "one more thing that has to get done." In the NCFL sites, a natural connection has been with the Parent and Child Together (PACT) time. PACT is a daily time when parents and children come together for joint literacy activities. Teachers have been successful in presenting the portfolio as a journal/record for PACT time.

How do I know if the right things are being put into the portfolios?

Ask yourself, and ask the parent and child, if this selection is typical for the period covered by the conference. Those are the types of things to include in the NCFL family portfolio.

But just as important as selecting a typical piece is the families' written description of the piece. What do they call it? Is it simply a "picture" or is it "a drawing that shows the colors my daughter is learning this month?" How does the family describe the significance of the selection? Is it simply "what we did" or is it "something that we also do at home with my other children?" Over time, families' interpretations can reveal changes in knowledge, values, and beliefs related to parent-child relationships.

What if we disagree on what should go into the portfolio? For example, I might think that the piece chosen by the parent and child is not representative of their work during the period.

Invite the parent to include your perspective when writing the description of the selection. They can first describe your perspective and then write why they disagree with your interpretation of the selection.

This will document your feeling that the selected piece is not typical for the family, as well as the fact that the parent doesn't share the same perspective. Further, it communicates to the parent and child that they are the owners of the portfolio and that what they think and say are important.

What if the parent and child are uncomfortable with including works-in-progress? Some prefer to wait until their work "looks good" before putting it into the portfolio.

This is an issue that commonly arises. Respect the family's perspective while you talk with them about adding unfinished pieces to the portfolio. It is natural for a parent to feel that one's product should be finished, should be right, and should be free of mistakes. That is what we all learned in school.

Discuss with parents that the portfolio is different. It is not a place where grades are assigned. It is OK to include works that aren't perfect.

You may want to use analogies and metaphors to make this point. The portfolio is like a family photo album. Just as you record all types of scenes and family events in a photo album, you collect all types of representations in portfolios. A photo album has snapshots of birthdays and weddings, but also shots of everyday life. It includes photos of everyday activities, not just the ones where we look our best. The portfolio is the same. It is the place to record what we do normally, day in and day out.

What if a child doesn't want to put his PACT product into the portfolio?

This is something that you should expect to happen. Most children (and adults, for that matter) would rather display their work in the classroom or at home on the refrigerator door, not tuck it away in a folder. Plan ahead to make xerox copies or photographs of PACT products. File the copies and photos in family portfolios.

What if a parent and child don't have a joint product to include?

This is a typical occurrence at the beginning of some families' participation in family literacy programs. The parent and child may do the same activity during PACT time, but not jointly. It is not uncommon to see a parent and child working on two separate finger paintings, for example.

In a case like this, if parallel play was typical for a parent and child during the four-week period, have them choose typical parallel products to include in the portfolio. Attach to each their written descriptions of what the activity was and what it meant to them.

The point is to document what was typical for the period. If parallel play is what was typical, then that should be represented in the portfolio.

I'm concerned about having the space to store all of this material in my classroom.

Remember, you are not going to include <u>everything</u> in the portfolio. One of the purposes of the monthly meeting you have with parents and children is to review all that they have done over that period and to selectively choose things representative of typical work for that period. The portfolio

contains representative samples of work; it is not the place where all of one's work is stored.

I'm more concerned with process than product. The portfolios seem to be more product oriented.

The "products" included in the portfolios are not intended as end products, or post-tests. Rather, they should represent the current status of dynamic relationships. Over time, the portfolio entries serve as markers of the status at different points. This allows documentation of change.

The entries may include works that are in any stage of development. The entries may also be representations of a process, such as a photograph of mother and daughter dressing up in costumes during PACT time.

Think of portfolio entries as "snapshots" of a process at a particular point in time. A series of snapshots over time, such as the monthly portfolio entries, will provide descriptive evidence of the extent and the nature of changes.

Can you give me some more examples of things that might be included in portfolios?

In the NCFL sites, parent-child literacy activities are typically carried out in the early childhood classroom. Children are encouraged to plan and lead the activities. Some portfolio entries that result from such activities include:

- Xerox copy of a page from a storybook parent and child are writing together.
- Photograph of holiday activities, such as coloring Easter eggs.
- Child's drawing of a character from a story read by the parent.
- A printed draft of a song that the parent and child are writing together on a word processor.
- Photographs of parent-child activities done in the block area, the kitchen area, dress-up area, etc. of the classroom

Problems in Implementation of Portfolios

Three main problems have been encountered in the first months of implementation of NCFL family portfolios. The first and foremost concern expressed by teachers has been: How do you get the portfolio process started at the beginning of the year? What if the parents are reluctant to share their interpretations of portfolio selections during monthly meetings?

As mentioned earlier, family portfolios represent a new way of thinking about assessment, both for teachers and parents. It takes time for the process to become familiar within the context of family literacy classrooms. One way to get the process started is to incorporate it into existing program components. In the NCFL sites, Parent Time (PT) meetings are a time when parents meet together to discuss issues of parenting. Teachers can use this forum to introduce the practice of reflecting on parents' joint literacy activities with children. Doing the initial discussions within a group context removes the pressure from individuals to participate. Parents can can choose the timing and level of participation in such discussions. Over time, parents typically become comfortable with the process. In this way, a transition to monthly portfolio conferences with individual families can be accomplished.

The second type of problem with family portfolios has occurred when families insert products into portfolios without describing in writing what they are and what significance they have. This is often the result of not allowing sufficient time for conducting monthly conferences. The solution to this problem was mentioned earlier. Teachers should seek to integrate the family portfolio into the existing program components. Look for ways that the portfolio supports what is already being done. Then, plan the time required to conduct the conferences.

The third problem evidenced in some sites has been the tendency for parents and children to use the portfolio as a place to store all of their joint literacy activities. An essential part of the process is missed when this happens. It is important for parents and children to periodically reflect on their joint activities and to evaluate them. What have they been doing together? Of all their joint activities, what has been typical for the past month? Have they been working in a particular medium, or activity area, or on a particular theme? Or, do they tend to do a variety of activities? Do they also do these types of things at home?

Portfolio conferences should help cultivate the habit of reflecting on parent-child activities, and thus on parent-child relationships. Choosing representative entries for portfolios is part of that process.

3. Analyzing the Contents of Family Portfolios

Now that you've implemented family portfolios in your program, what do you do with them? Is there a way to systematically analyze the contents of individual family portfolios? If so, who should do the analysis? Is there a way to compare information across portfolios? If so, how do you develop common themes for comparison?

This section will begin to address the questions related to analysis of portfolio contents. The National Center for Family Literacy's use of portfolio assessment is in its initial year of operation, so the answers presented here should be interpreted as coming from our existing knowledge base. We continue to learn about the process from teachers, parents, and children in our family literacy sites. The intent here is to share what we've learned thus far and to initiate a dialogue with other portfolio users around the nation.

Analyzing Individual Portfolios

Is there a way to systematically analyze the writing samples, drawings, xerox copies, photographs, etc. that are stored in family portfolios? Yes. The method is called content analysis. It involves the development of coding themes and the assignment of themes to the content of portfolios.

This section will give examples of how to develop coding themes and how to use them to analyze portfolios. The process described here can be used by parents and teachers to analyze the contents of individual portfolios. The same process can be used by program administrators, researchers, and policymakers for the analysis of portfolio data. Different perspectives may require different coding themes in order to answer particular questions but the process of content analysis remains the same.

Coding Themes

Coding themes are the categories into which the contents of portfolios fit. Two themes have been identified already: the names families use to describe a portfolio entry and the interpretation they assign to that entry. A variety of subthemes can exist within those two major themes.

For purposes of discussion, assume that four families chose the same type of activity, fingerpainting, to include in their portfolios. Their descriptions of the activity are shown on the next page:

PC1: My daughter and I fingerpainted during PACT time. My picture shows our house; her picture shows her bedroom.

PC2: I have always liked to fingerpaint, so I showed my daughter how to fingerpaint during PACT time. She traced the lines I made on the paper. This is the picture we did.

PC3: My daughter wanted to fingerpaint in PACT time today. I drew a house on the paper and she traced over it with fingerpaint. This is our picture.

PC4: My daughter planned for us to fingerpaint in PACT time. She wanted to draw a house. We worked on it together, with her telling me where to put the doors and windows.

When reading those four entries, it is apparent that all four contain information about a common subtheme: the nature of parent-child interaction. In the first case, there was no interaction during the completion of the portfolio entry. Parent and child worked independently on two separate paintings. In the remaining three cases, parent and child worked cooperatively on a joint project, but the nature of the interaction differed in each case:

PC1: This mother and daughter were engaged in parallel play. Although they were both doing the same thing, they were doing it separately.

PC2: This was a parent-initiated and parent-led activity.

PC3: This was a child-initiated and parent-led activity.

PC4: This was a child-initiated and child-led activity.

Thus, four subthemes have emerged to describe the range of entries related to parent-child interaction. These subthemes can be used to analyze other portfolio entries that are related to parent-child interactions.

Assigning Codes to Portfolio Contents

A portfolio entry can be assigned the code "parallel play" if the description describes mother and child working separately during the activity. "Child-initiated and Child-led" would be the code assigned to entries where the child planned the activity and where the parent followed the child's lead during the activity.

The four positions just described present a continuum along which the nature of parent-child interaction can be coded. In NCFL sites, a goal of parent-child activities is for the child to plan and lead the activity and for parents to support those child-initiated efforts. Thus, the continuum would extend from parallel play to child-initiated and child-led activities.

The example presented here focused on one theme, parent-child interaction. Additional themes can be identified by examining other portfolio entries. When an entry doesn't fit an existing theme, a new one can be created to accommodate it. Additional themes may also be found in the research and theoretical literature in the areas of education, sociology, psychology, and other disciplines that study families. Finally, the goals of the family literacy program may provide themes to use in the analysis of portfolio entries.

Aggregating Portfolio Data

In addition to analyzing individual portfolio entries, you may want to summarize the findings for a group of entries. This can be done in a number of ways. Using the continuum of parent-child interactions as an example, portfolio entries may be grouped, or aggregated, at the individual and classroom levels by:

- analyzing the contents of an individual portfolio across time and coding the entries related to parent-child interaction. Were the entries for a particular period consistently located at a point on the continuum? Did the entries over time show a shift in interactional style? Were entries in December coded at the same level as those in September? In May?

- analyzing all of the class portfolio entries for a particular period and coding entries related to parent-child interaction. Then, determine how many families seem to be at various points on the continuum at that point in time.

Portfolio entries can also (theoretically) be aggregated at the school system level, at the state level, and at the national level. The effort required to standardize methods at those levels would have to be weighed against the value of the data that would be gained.

Conclusion

This guide addresses a common problem in family literacy programs: How do you document changes in parent-child relationships over time? Portfolios are presented here as a method that is appropriate for such an assessment problem.

References listed in the final section of this guide show that portfolio assessment is already being used in early childhood programs and in a variety of adult programs. In those uses, portfolios commonly document developmental skills of young children or the academic skills of adults. NCFL's family portfolio represents a new use of the method, to document changes in parent-child relationships. Portfolios are appropriate in this area because they can capture the rich context in which those changes occur, enhancing the ability to explain what the changes are and how they occur.

As mentioned in the introduction, NCFL's implementation of family portfolios is in its first months of operation. This guide represents our current knowledge of how the process is working. We are continuing to learn from the teachers and families in family literacy sites how they are formulating, implementing, and assessing family portfolios.

Our intention is to periodically update this guide, reflecting the evolution of the method in the particular settings of family literacy programs. We are interested in learning how the method evolves in different settings, the problems encountered, and how those problems are being addressed. In addition, we want to learn the different ways that portfolios are being integrated into existing program structures.

We invite you to contact the National Center for Family Literacy and share your experiences with the use of family portfolios. Your feedback will inform future revisions of this guide. Please contact:

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Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
1215 N. Pitt Street
Alexandria, VA, 223214
703-549-9110

FairTest. FairTest Examiner. This quarterly newsletter examines issues related to testing and testing reform. Also available is a bibliography on testing and evaluating young children:

FairTest
342 Broadway
Cambridge, MA 02139
617-864-4810

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